

# Mood in porphyria's lover

[Life](#), [Love](#)



Robert Browning uses powerful moments of personification and imagery that linger in a reader's mind. However, the one craft that truly stands out is the mood of the poem. Browning uses specific word choice, imagery, and tone to shape the mood into what can best be described as haunting. Given the topic of the piece, the reaction to find the piece haunting only seems natural. But Browning uses some very interesting ways to make a reader slightly uncomfortable even before awareness is raised about the disturbing murder to follow.

He also uses punctuation in the last few lines to capture the long-going uneasiness and blooming insanity of the work. After the first line of the poem, Browning begins to use personification, telling us "The sullen wind was soon awake, / It tore the elm-tops down for spite, / And did its worst to vex the lake:" (Browning 2-4). The words chosen for personifying the wind have clear negative connotations. Browning tells us that the wind is tearing down the tree tops just "for spite", which acknowledges that the wind has a specific intent to hurt the trees.

The lake is also being purposefully agitated by the wind. The aggressive nature of the wind is foreshadowing the strangling of Porphyria and certainly setting an unsettling mood from the very first lines of the poem. Porphyria enters the house and "from her form / Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl, / And laid her soiled gloves by, untied / Her hat and let the damp hair fall" (Browning 10-13). The key words in these lines are "dripping" and "soiled". Both of these words are purposefully used to represent Porphyria. The term soiled implies that she is in fact unfaithful. Dripping" could be taken in a couple of ways. Metaphorically, she could be dripping with

dirtiness from sleeping with another man/other men. Literally, her cloak and shawl are dripping, but this could also refer to specific bodily functions women encounter during intercourse. These very subtle word choices play an important role in setting the attitude towards Porphyria. The narrator has already stated that he was listening “with heart fit to break”, which suggests even before Porphyria walks in dripping with soiled gloves that she has done something terrible (Browning 5).

The mood at this point is an uneasiness caused from the aggressive wind and relational tension between the narrator and his beloved. Porphyria calls for the narrator and he does not respond. Porphyria's reaction to his unresponsiveness is racy for the 1800s: She put my arm about her waist, And made her smooth white shoulder bare, And all her yellow hair displaced, And, stooping, made my cheek lie there, And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair, Murmuring how she loved me — (Browning 16-21). The imagery here is what sets the mood; her “smooth white shoulder bare” and “yellow hair” falling against his cheek.

The reader is given opportunity to imagine her voice murmuring into his ear. Through this strong imagery, the mood moves switches from aggressive to strictly discomfoting, specifically due to the use of the word “murmuring”. In most contexts, murmuring is used when a large crowd is speaking all at once or there is some other type of soft constant noise. With that in mind, it can be noted that if Porphyria's statements of love are simply background noise, the narrator must be listening intently to his own mind. This is the point in which the narrators' negative mental state begins to reveal itself.

The mood remains uncomfortable but added to that is a sense of suspense. After the narrator explains that Porphyria has good intent in loving him, but that she struggles with the surplus of passion within her, he “ looked up at her eyes / Happy and proud; at last I knew / Porphyria worshiped me” (Browning 31-33). The fact that he believes Porphyria worships him would suggest some form of narcissistic disorder on the part of the narrator. After the narrator has allowed readers into this part of his mind, there is no question that he is not mentally stable.

Readers may be slightly more uneasy, almost to the point of anxiousness, being inside the mind of an unstable man. However, the narrator's tone is very matter of fact, which subdues the mood to a tolerable ache of emotional discomfort. The narrator states “ That moment she was mine, mine, fair, / Perfectly pure and good” (Browning 36-37), and after such realization, he decides that in order to preserve this moment, he needs to take action. He gathers “ all her hair / In one long yellow string I wound / Three times her little throat around, / And strangled her” (Browning 38-41).

In this specific moment, imagery is not to thank for setting the mood. It is Browning's tone that acknowledges the lack of emotion whilst a man is strangling his lover. The narrator voices no anger, nor bestows Porphyria with any compliments of beauty or character during the actual event of her strangling. After she is dead, the narrator voices no remorse, and even tells himself “ No pain felt she; / I am quite sure she felt no pain. / As a shut bud that holds a bee” (Browning 41-43). The narrators streaming thoughts of insanity continue when he “ warily oped her lids: again / Laughed the blue eyes without a stain. And I untightened next the tress / About her neck”

(Browning 44-47). Porphyria's dead eyes are still alive to him, but now they are pure (without a stain). The mood is set by the unusually calm tone paired with such a tragic and horrific event. Some readers may choose to feel the calm expressed by the tone, or some may choose to feel the disgust and anxiety expressed by the text. One of the most interesting ways that Browning creates a mood of insanity is in his use of exclamation points.

The narrator speaks of Porphyria's " smiling rosy little head" resting upon his shoulder, and claims it is " glad it has its utmost will, / That all it scorned at once is fled" (Browning 52-54). In the next line, Browning includes his usage of punctuation by writing " And I, its love, am gained instead! " (Browning 55). The narrator is genuinely ecstatic that Porphyria can have him, instead of struggling with trying to deny herself her passionate pleasures. To him, he is the greatest prize, which reinforces the idea that the narrator is narcissistic.

Through this realization in a reader's mind, the mood of insanity is cemented, since the monotonous and unexcited tone used by Browning changes into a tone that is content and happy despite the narrator's horrible crime. The last three lines of this work read: " And thus we sit together now, / And all night long we have not stirred, / And yet God has not said a word! " (Browning 58-60). Imagery and punctuation are key in these lines. The reader is previously drawn a clear picture of Porphyria, blushing red with her unstained eyes and wet, damp, yellow hair, resting on the narrators' shoulder.

The mood gathered from " all night long we have not stirred" in this context is simply an extension of the illogical kind of insanity that has already

formed. The narrator is, according to the exclamation point, in awe that God has not spoken up about his indecent actions. The building sentiment of insanity has reached its peak in this last punctuation mark. As a poet, Browning understands that by putting an audience in the mind of a sociopathic narrator, he is making the audience complicit to the crime.

To this end, Browning uses several tools to create a mood of uneasiness, discomfort, and insanity from its early stages of introduction to its grand finale. The mood of uneasiness is essential to capture the mental state of the narrator. Further, Browning uses the lack of conscience in his narrator to heighten the discomfort of his audience. Imagery, personification, word choice, and punctuation all greatly assist in pushing the audience to feel a certain way throughout the work.

## **Works Cited**

1. Browning, Robert. Porphyria's Lover.